



# Wired to the World

by Ralph Lee Scott

## Anti-virus Software

**T**his column is the third installment of a four-part series on computer security. The recent “Mydoom” virus attack was an example of a fast-spreading Internet virus that clogs incoming mail boxes. Many of you have already received a ton of e-mails from people you have never heard of, or messages from “PAYROLL,” “Message returned,” or “TRAFFIC OFFICE.” These were distributed to you because someone did not keep his/her computer anti-virus software up-to-date and/or opened an e-mail attachment that contained the virus. Outside of the admonition not to open e-mail attachments from people you don’t know, what can you do to prevent the spread of viruses to other computers?

The standard method is to purchase, install, and run anti-virus software such as Symantec/Norton AntiVirus or McAfee VirusScan. Recently, however, a new wrinkle has been introduced to this standard method. Trend Micro is now offering a free online virus-scan service at [housecall.trendmicro.com](http://housecall.trendmicro.com). McAfee and Symantec/Norton now offer similar services. When you go to the [housecall.trendmicro.com](http://housecall.trendmicro.com) Web site you can select the “Scan your PC” link and have an interactive scan done for free. No updates are necessary and you always have access to the latest version of scanning data files and software. You do not have to use up disk space with the anti-virus software and updates. If your computer files are damaged or infected, you can isolate or remove them, usually without danger to your operating system. If you are on the road and do not have access to corporate or networked virus file updates due to a firewall, you can still scan your computer if you have an Internet connection.

These free scanning services work in the following manner. A small program is downloaded to your computer that checks for drives to scan. You are then given a menu list from which you select those drives you want to be scanned. At this point, these scanning services work like traditional scanning software. Files can be quarantined or deleted as desired. Symantec/Norton and McAfee now have similar free services available at

their Web sites.

Computer viruses either plant a small program on your computer (1) by moving around in e-mail messages (like the ILOVEYOU e-mails that we all get) that take control of your e-mail address book, (2) through worms (a small piece of software that repeatedly infects other computers – CODE RED is an example), and (3) through so-called Trojan horses (small programs that are programmed to erase your hard disk). These viruses take advantage of human curiosity and are executed by simply opening the ILOVEYOU message. You should be wary of e-mail addresses that include the .com, .vbs., or .exe file extensions. The best policy is to never run any executable files that you receive.

It is also a good policy not to open e-mails that are unexpected. Simply delete these suspicious e-mails from the “Inbox” several times a day, using a filter system that places e-mails from known senders in individual boxes (such as USENET group mail, family, colleagues) and leaving the unknown senders’ e-mails sitting alone in the “Inbox” where they can be deleted in bulk.

Some e-mail services, including EarthLink and MSN, permit you to go to a higher level of spam blocking. Unless a particular e-mail has been “certified” through some means, it is blocked. The checking for certification is usually done by checking incoming e-mails against known e-mails previously received or from addresses in your address book. If you select this higher level of security, non-valid e-mail senders must be approved by you before the e-mail is delivered to your Inbox. An excellent way to get rid of spam, this service should be included in future e-mail program releases.

It seems like every few days a new virus attacks with a slightly different twist. The only way to protect your computer is to keep your virus data files up-to-date or use one of the free scan programs offered by the major anti-virus firms. In the next “Wired to the World” column we will conclude this series on computer security.